

feature



Terry Martin tells his story.

DALPHOTO: KENNETH KAM

How do you tell your mother you've got HIV? And what was coming out in '86 was that people were dead in two years. So how do you say, "Look, don't worry. I'm going to be around." And my sons, that was hard for me to do. Other than that there... my job. I didn't want to tell anyone at my job, 'cause I thought, you don't know what they're going to treat you like.

That was the kind of things that really bothered me. I had to deal with that stuff. I spent a lot of nights just crying at home. You just can't tell everybody. I was scared of losing friends. But you know - I haven't lost one friend.

Gazette: Telling people was the hardest thing. Once you told people, how did it feel? How did people react?

Martin: Once I started telling people that I was HIV positive, I told everybody I wanted to know. And I felt really good about myself. I was ashamed about being HIV positive at first. How do you get it? "Sex." People will always talk. I got rid of this shame, and then I just went from there. I just said to myself, "Tell people, because you're going to get sick. And they're going to wonder what the hell is wrong with you." I started telling my friends. I told two or three people at my job that I really had faith and trust in. But no one ever walked away.

Gazette: What's been the most encouraging thing that you've experienced?

Martin: I found out I liked myself. You know? I've got a lot to give and I've got a lot of time ahead of me. A

lot of time. And it's been a learning process with this disease because I didn't know anything about it. And every day in this office, I read something because I want to get all information I can for my own health. That helps.

Gazette: I guess, the biggest thing is overcoming the stigma attached to having AIDS.

Martin: That's the big thing. You say that someone is HIV positive and people go "Oh, god." And they literally freak. I mean some people really freak. Geez. AIDS has been around. But there's also a lot of people who are just curious. Very curious. They want to sit and talk.

Gazette: So education is the key.

Martin: Yes, education is the key. And to let people know that this isn't a 'gay man's disease' and it never was. And for them to get over that homophobia. That's a lot of our problems when we go to schools. They think, "well, you're gay." And I say, "Look. This disease is everybody's disease. Not just mine because I'm a gay man. Everybody's."

Gazette: You've mentioned the Nova Scotia Persons With AIDS Coalition as a great support. What is its mandate or purpose?

Martin: We're here to give all our time and energy to persons living with HIV and AIDS. We have peer support. We look after people. We look after our friends. We really do. We just don't walk away. We sit with them. We're at their home for the ones who've died at home. So it's a really a peer support to let people know who we are.

We're not just wasting government money, I'll tell you right now. A lot of people think, "Yeah right. You're just a bunch of gay men." To me, if I didn't have this organization, I'd have nothing. I know that. I'd have absolutely nothing. And I probably wouldn't have the need to live because this organization has meant so much to me and done so much for me.

Gazette: What are some of the organizations accomplishments?

Martin: The support. And setting up programs. We have a Women & AIDS program right now. And that was very important for me. At our retreat, I said, "Look. We got get a Women & AIDS project going. We have to get something set up." So that's a real good goal. Black Outreach Project. We need to get into the Black community. As a man like myself who's white, I couldn't get into that community. And that's the second thing we've got.

It's not easy. Sometimes it's really depressing. I want them to know and to ask questions like "What are you doing during the day?" and "How's the illness affecting you?" And I talk about that. I talk about medical shit, drugs. Drugs, they're not cheap. I'm alright; I have a plan. But a lot of my friends don't have that. And they can't get the best drugs. And I feel so sorry for them.

Gazette: What is like living with AIDS? What do you have to do? Like yesterday?

Martin: Yesterday, I spent five and a half hours giving two units of

blood. I guess I have to go the clinic on a regular basis. A lot of blood work done, a lot of bone scans and all that stuff. It gets very tiresome, I'll tell you right now, especially when you spend half your day in a hospital. I got a blood transfusion done yesterday and I've got to get a bone scan done at the end of the month.

There are things happening to my body that I don't know what's going on. I know how I feel. I just don't know what's going on inside my body. There are days I feel like crap, when I don't even get out of bed. I can't get my head off the pillow. I'm wondering what's going to happen.

I'm going to have problems with walking. My left leg gives out under me every once in a while. I get out of bed and stand up, and it just crumbles right underneath me. And I'm just very concerned. I don't have any muscle in my body, hardly at all. And I don't know what's happening to me. And the general physicians don't know. And that's why they're doing all the work on me, because they want to find out. But it's really hellish when you're walking down the street, then all of sudden, 'BOOM' and you're flat on your face. It's very scary.

Gazette: It must get pretty scary at times.

Martin: Yeah, it is. I never worried about it before. But I am worried about it now. Things are starting to take place that I just can't figure out why. Loss of appetite. I'm on a drug to stimulate it but it's just not doing what I feel it should do. From loss of appetite, worrying about my eyes, so you're constantly looking at yourself, physically. But it's the inside you don't know what's happening.

Gazette: Are you scared about dying?

Martin: No. I've been looking forward to dying all my life. No, I'm not scared about dying. The only thing I want is good care. I want my family there. I want my companion there. And when I'm ready to say, "I know it's my time," I'm not going to hold onto anybody whatsoever. I'm just gonna say, this is my time and let it go. A lot of people just hold on and hold on to their family. Well, I'm not going to do that. And I know how far I want to take my illness. I don't want to lay in a bed for two or three years, wasting away. I don't want that. I've got a few other plans for right now.

Gazette: Have you worked yourself to reach this state of mind?

Martin: I think I did since about 1989. It was like 'Wow!'. I knew things were changing in my mind. I thought about it. I talked to a few

friends about it. A lot of them said, "well, you'll spend a lot of time in the hospital." And I'll never die in a damn hospital. Never in my life. It's going to be in my bed with my loved ones around. I've never been scared of dying, even when I was younger.

Gazette: What kind of things would you tell individuals who think that they might be HIV positive or just found out that they were HIV positive or have AIDS?

Martin: If they were just diagnosed, I would tell them, "This is not a death sentence. You've got the rest of your life." For people out there who think they may be, "Go for the test." We have an anonymous testing site coming up in April. It's all coded. No one knows who you are. And I think it's very important to find out about your health. Some people don't know until they have full-blown AIDS. And that's really scary for somebody. I would tell people to get out there, get tested, and start learning to deal with it. And I deal with it!

Gazette: Is there anything else you would like to tell people?

Martin: We need to let people know that condoms are not 100% safe. But we need the condoms. A lot of kids don't use them. If we could get control over this, that would be perfect. But I don't want to see anyone infected with this disease. I've lost so many friends of mine. And each time I lose one, I just back and go "whoa". I can't even mourn anymore. That's very very hard.

Friends, I've been losing them left and right. What can you do? God. I may be next. It's been a struggle with me - a lot of my friends that I've known for 20 years, watching them die. I worry about my companion getting ill, and dealing with him. But if he gets ill and I get ill, we're kind of stuck. And we'll have to rely on our support teams. It's just important to live. That's my big thing. I'm going to live. After the year 2000, I don't care. I'm going to see the turn of the century so I can just party! But after that, I really wouldn't care what happens.

Gazette: So any parties in the works?

Martin: I like partying, but I can't drink. If I drink, because I have no immune system, it could knock me out for God knows how long. But when I go out, I drink juice and water. And I enjoy going to a bar just to get out of my home. My main goal is 1999-2000. That's my goal right now. And that's what I'm ready for no matter what. I'll fight for that until God knows when.



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